
An interview on linguistic variation with...

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Noam Chomsky is Professor (Emeritus) at the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. His work within the Cognitive Sciences ranges over the fields of Mathematics, Philosophy, and Linguistics, where he has made groundbreaking contributions. The approach to linguistic variation outlined in his *Lectures on Government and Binding* (1981) was the starting milestone of the “Principles and Parameters” framework, which gave rise to a wave of prolific and seminal studies on linguistic variation.

From your perspective, what are the relevant levels of abstractness to approach the Faculty of Language? The standard ones (namely “language,” “dialect,” and “idiolect”)? Others?

Depends on the depth of analysis sought. For some purposes, it suffices to discuss “English,” “Chinese,” etc., knowing full well that these are not linguistically well-defined notions. For other purposes, the right level is specific states of I-language. And other choices lie between.

What are the main advantages / reasons to study linguistic variation?

To determine the genetic contribution to the capacity to use and understand language – the topic of UG –, we plainly want to know what options it permits. Much as in the study of other subsystems of the organism; e.g., the visual system.

How do you conceive the relation / tension between linguistic variation and linguistic uniformity throughout the years?

The relation seems uncontroversial. I’ve never understood why there should be tension.

In your opinion, what are the contributions of dialectology (both traditional and present-day studies) to the study of language?

Dialectology is the study of closely related languages, providing a more refined picture of the scope and character of the language faculty.

What are the relevant sources to obtain evidence to study language and its variation (speakers' own competence, corpora, experiments, non-linguistic disciplines, etc.)? Is any of them potentially more relevant than the others?

I don't see how there can be a general answer, any more than there is in, say, Chemistry. Depends on the task at hand, the materials, and techniques available, etc.

Much current theoretical research is complemented with corpora and statistical / experimental analyses. In fact, dialectology also resorts to experimental and field work methods, traditionally. What do you think is the position of theoretical approaches to language in such scenario?

All experimental analysis is theory-driven; that includes statistical analysis, field methods, study of informant judgments (including one's own), any other approach to gathering data. The more adequate the theories, the more significant the experimental work can be. And of course theory-guided experiment is the basis and the test for theoretical inquiry.

Why do you think dialectal studies have typically focused on the lexicon, phonetics, and morphology? Are we in a better position now (than decades ago) to carry out studies on syntactic variation? If so, why?

The same was true of other studies of language. Not enough was understood about syntax. By now, with greater understanding, linguistic inquiry (including dialect studies) can extend to these areas. Same with semantics.

Some recent studies argue that it is diversity what truly characterizes human language, often implying that the universal nature of language is wrong (or that some allegedly specific traits, such as recursion, is not present in all languages). Is this scenario a residue of the fact that the I-language / E-language distinction has not been understood? Is it something else?

I'm responsible for the term "E-language", but it is now commonly used in ways that I did not define and do not understand. It seems close to truism that the human language faculty, like all subsystems of the organism, is characterized by universal properties and diversity: UG and the options it permits. It is apparently only in the study of language that such truisms are sometimes considered controversial; one might ask why.

By the term "recursion" here what is meant is infinite scope. If some linguistic system lacks recursion in this sense, then it is, in effect, a finite list. If children were exposed to such a system, and recognized it to be a language (they might not; they might take it to be a puzzle of some sort), then they would, instinctively, rely on UG to reinterpret it to yield infinite capacity. Alternatives are conceivable, but highly unlikely.

Within the Generative Enterprise, the research stemming from the Principles and Parameters framework has proven very fruitful to study both variation and uniformity. However, this trend has been subject to much criticism, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. In your opinion, what is the status of “Parameter Theory” nowadays?

It is flourishing, notably in the work of Richard Kayne, Giuseppe Longobardi, and many others. Before the P&P framework crystallized, the assumption within the Generative Enterprise was that UG provided a format for (infinitely many) possible grammars (I-languages), and an evaluation measure to select among them, given the data available. It was well understood that this approach has fundamental deficiencies. I know of no coherent alternative to these two approaches.

What are the challenges that we will have to address in the following decades when it comes to study language and its variation?

Better understanding of UG and its options, with challenges too numerous to mention.